

Chapter 196 - Lesson

I came at her *hard*.

Or as hard as I could manage, anyway, given the limitations I was currently working with.

I committed to forward pressure—closing distance, keeping my hands up, using short, linear strikes that didn't require any rotation through the center.

Quick jabs. Straight punches. Forward-driving knees that I had to be careful with because *any* knee strike pulled on the core, but the ones that came up rather than across, were manageable.

Kenzie backed off the first time, clearly thrown by the sudden reversal.

Her instinct had still been somewhere in *protective mode*—and now I was the one pressing the engagement, walking her down across the tatami, hands flicking out in a steady, probing rhythm.

I could see the conflict on her face in real-time.

The competitive part of her obviously wanted to respond properly—to meet aggression with aggression and push back the way she normally would. But the protective part of her wanted to keep playing defensive, to let me move and not actually risk hitting the wrong spot.

The two were fighting each other behind her eyes, and the result was that her counters were coming in just a fraction late, a fraction soft, a fraction *uncertain*.

Which was, in a strange way, *exactly* what I needed right now.

Because it gave me space and time to experiment.

I shifted my stance as I pressed in—pulling it narrower, hands raised higher, weight loaded slightly more onto the front foot than I usually carried it; A boxing stance.

Specifically, *Jin's* boxing stance.

He had spent enough sessions throwing dangerous haymakers at me using his cybernetic-arm-enhanced punching combos that I'd had plenty of opportunity to study exactly how he set up, and right now his style was probably the closest match I had to anything I could realistically execute with my current limitations.

It wasn't perfect, of course.

Jin used a *lot* of rotational power generation through the hips and core—most boxers did, as far as [CQC] and [Martial Arts] were telling me, as that was where their power primarily came from—and I couldn't replicate that even a little bit right now.

But the *stance* itself, the footwork, the way the strikes traveled in tight, linear paths from the guard and back to the guard without ever requiring big body movements—*that part* I could actually do.

With significantly less power than Jin generated, sure. But the *form* was viable, at least.

So I threw a quick double-jab at Kenzie's guard and drove a straight cross between her hands—then immediately followed it with a forward shuffle-step that brought me into a clinch range I wasn't actually planning to use, just to see how she'd react to the pressure.

She rapidly backed off again, ears flicking, brow furrowing.

"What are you—" she started, and I cut her off with another jab combination.

She had to actually defend that one, raising her guard and slipping the second punch with a small, quick head-movement. Her counter came back fast—a hook toward my shoulder—but it was clearly pulled, the speed there but the commitment of power entirely absent.

Reading that, I purposefully caught it on my shoulder and used the impact as an opportunity to shift my weight, pivoting *just slightly*—far less than I'd normally rotate, just enough to redirect my body without engaging the ribs—and threw a low, short hook of my own toward her hip.

I *almost* connected.

She barely got her elbow down in time to catch it, and the look she gave me afterward was *significantly* more focused than it had been thirty seconds ago as she felt the actual heft behind it—I was not pulling my punches at all.

Her protective fog was clearly burning off. She was finally starting to take this seriously again.

"Okay," she muttered, half to herself, ears flattening into focus-mode. "Okay, you *actually* want to play. ***Fine.***"

She came back at me.

The next exchange was the closest thing we'd had to an actual fight all session.

She still wasn't going entirely full-throttle—I could see her checking her own commitment levels, especially on anything aimed at my torso—but she was finally engaging like a sparring partner instead of a worried friend.

Quick combinations, her natural agility putting her in and out of my range faster than I could really react to, claws *carefully* sheathed but the threat of them still there in the shape of her movements.

I dealt with it by refusing to give her angles.

That was the other thing I'd noticed Jin doing in our sessions—when he didn't want to engage someone's flanking work, he just *pivoted on the spot* and made them re-do their setup using nothing but small turns and minimal commitment.

Keeping the centerline always pointed at the opponent and forcing them to do all the work of finding a new angle from scratch.

It worked.

Not as well as it worked for Jin, of course, because Jin had *real* rotation in his pivots and *real* torque behind his counter-punches once he set them.

But it worked well enough that Kenzie spent the next thirty seconds visibly frustrated, dancing around me, hands flicking out and being repeatedly blocked, redirected, or evaded by the simple expedient of me refusing to let her get out of my sightline.

It was, I had to admit, a *deeply* unsatisfying way to fight.

My usual style *flowed*. It moved through positions, transitioned between ranges, generated power through full-body integration.

This was—boxy, downright static, in comparison. And worst of all, completely *powerless*.

I connected a few punches here and there, the dull thuds of fist meeting Kenzie's retreating form echoing through the dojo—but none of them really *did* anything. There was no power behind them, no follow-through, just contact for the sake of contact. And Kenzie, to her credit, didn't feel the need to humor my meager output by pretending otherwise.

Instead, she dropped her guard, ears flicking back as she straightened out of her stance.

"Okay, we should be warmed up by now," she said, blowing out a breath. "Let's call it, alright?"

She clearly wanted out of this spar.

But I... Was not quite happy with the whole experience. Not yet.

I smiled teasingly, just slightly. "Honestly? I haven't *really* felt like I was being pushed here..."

Kenzie's expression went *flat*. She stared at me for a full second.

Then her ears slowly perked back up into a position I would generously describe as *deeply unimpressed*. Her tail gave one long, sharp swish behind her.

"...Fine," she said, slowly. "Don't say you didn't ask for it later..."

She rolled her shoulders, dropped her weight low, and slid into her *actual* Arkion Dojo combat stance—the one she used for all the serious spars with Miss K present and the one that put her full genetic-modification advantages on display.

Claws still sheathed, but the rest of her was *fully* engaged now.

I barely had time to register the mistake I'd just made.

She almost immediately pushed off the tatami with her powerful legs and *launched*—practically soaring across the gap between us, closing the distance in a single explosive motion that I absolutely had *not* been prepared for.

My body reacted on instinct, side-stepping out of the line of attack—and my ribs *screamed* at the sudden, sharp lateral movement, a hot lance of pain shooting up the right side of my torso so intense that it briefly hollowed out my vision.

To my credit, I sidestepped successfully... But I couldn't turn fast enough for what came after.

Kenzie had already chained into a follow-up by the time I'd cleared her initial line—a tight, fast kick that came in from my blind side and connected solidly with my back, square between my shoulder blades.

The impact sent me tumbling.

I hit the tatami front-first, the fall driving the breath out of me and the impact compressing across the entire front of my torso in a way that—pain *exploded*, a full-body ignition that started at my ribs and radiated outward through every nerve ending that had any business being in the vicinity.

The sound that came out of me was somewhere between a grunt and a strangled scream, muffled into the mat as my arms folded under me on the way down, trying my best to keep my ribs safe from hitting the floor in a wrong way.

Kenzie was at my side in less than a second.

"S-Sera! Sera, oh shit, I'm so sorry—I'm so, so sorry, are you okay?! I—I thought you'd at least be able to *handle* that much, I didn't—please tell me you're okay—"

I couldn't answer right away.

I just lay there, face-down on the tatami, breathing very carefully and very shallowly while my body finished its full status report. It took a few moments—and a couple of slow, deliberate breaths that didn't expand the ribcage too much—before the worst of the pain receded enough for me to actually run a mental check.

Nothing felt broken. Nothing felt *re*-broken, which was honestly the even bigger concern.

The Ripper's work had held.

The fall had hurt—*was* still hurting, all across my torso—but at least it hadn't *undone* anything. Just bruised over the existing bruising.

'Small mercies...'

I let out a long, careful exhale and shifted enough to roll partially onto my side, waving Kenzie off with the hand that wasn't currently dedicated to bracing my ribs.

'I really deserved that one, huh?'

"That was—*entirely* my fault," I managed, voice tight but functional. "Not yours, Kenzie. Like at all. I pushed you for it. *After* you asked me—*several times*, I'm well aware—to be careful."

I tried for a smile and got about halfway there. "Sorry about that. That one's on me."

I added afterwards, because honesty cost nothing and because I was already lying on the floor of a sheltered rich girl's family dojo, "I also needed to check just *how bad* it really was. In case it happened again. So now I know what level of engagement I can handle."

That, apparently, was the wrong thing to say.

Kenzie's whole face shifted.

The relief that had started to creep in at the *not your fault* line drained right back out, replaced by something tight-jawed and unhappy. Her ears flattened against her skull.

"In case it happens *again*?" she echoed. "Sera—are you expecting to be in this kind of trouble *again* soon?!"

"I'm going to do my absolute best not to be," I immediately tried to calm her down. "*Ever*. Promise. I'm not an addict for suffering or pain, Kenzie. I swear. But—" I tried for honesty and a wince at the same time. "—it's not *really* something I can *promise* you. Work is dangerous out there..."

Kenzie didn't say anything to that.

She just looked at me for a long moment with an expression that was equal parts worried, miffed and a little bit lost—like she wanted to push back on this and didn't quite know where to start. But after a few moments, her ears simply settled into something resigned and she just sat back on her heels beside me, letting me stay on the tatami and breathe in slow, deliberate cycles until the worst of it passed.

I took some of the downtime to flick my eyes toward the back of the dojo, careful not to make the motion obvious—hoping that the genuinely embarrassing current state of affairs had done enough work to convince Mao that I wasn't actually a threat to her darling little sister.

And to my mild surprise—it seemed it *actually* had.

Mao was already on her feet, having quietly closed her book at some point and moved across the dojo toward the doors with that same unhurried elegance she seemed to carry at all times—except when she hugged Kenzie half-to-death.

Just as my eyes found her, she paused at the entrance and gave us both a small, easy nod.

"Enjoy your time, you two. *Don't hurt yourselves*," she said—with the faintest emphasis on the last part that was very specifically aimed at me, before turning and gliding out of the dojo entirely.

And then it was just me and Kenzie, left alone in the dojo.

Just like that.

'...I can't believe that actually worked,' I thought, blinking after the closed doors. *'What.'*

It was genuinely hard to quantify how disproportionately well that had landed.

The plan—if you could even charitably call it a plan, given how half-cooked and frankly ridiculous it had sounded inside my own head when I'd first improvised it—had been to use the spar as a kind of live demonstration. To show Mao that I was clearly injured, limited, and not running around at full capacity, and therefore *clearly* not the kind of person who posed any meaningful threat to her sister in this controlled setting.

And not only had it worked. It had worked *immediately*, without her hovering, without a follow-up conversation, without any of the polite-but-firm interrogations I'd been bracing for.

I had really, *genuinely* expected to spend the rest of this session being observed by her.

The fact that I had just been deemed *acceptable* and left to my own devices, without further comment, felt almost suspiciously easy.

'Either she really did just want a quick look and got what she needed,' I thought, watching the doors slowly settle back into place, *'or she's playing a longer game and I won't know what it actually was until much later. Probably the second one... **Almost certainly the second one.** But I'll take it for now. Not having to worry about her seeing some weird Anima-related stuff while I try to get my muscles in just the right order for Kenzie to learn something, is a big load off of my mind.'*

I slowly started getting myself back up onto my feet—and Kenzie was at my side instantly, one hand at my elbow and the other hovering near my back like she wasn't quite sure where it was safe to actually make contact.

The whole maneuver took longer than it should have.

My entire torso was still stinging, that I knew I was going to be feeling for the next several hours minimum. But it was manageable. The pain had levelled off from *acute* to *steady*, which was about as good as it was going to get without lying down for a while.

"We should get to the actual training now that we're warmed up," I said, easing my weight back over my feet properly and rolling my shoulders carefully. "Yeah?"

"Yeah! Yes, definitely." Kenzie released my elbow but stayed close, ears perked, clearly happy to have the conversation steered toward something less fraught.

We moved together back toward the center of the dojo, the tatami soft under my feet.

"So," I said, turning to face her. "Where do you want to start? You've been through more of Miss K's shard since our last session, I assume—is there anything specific you've picked up that you want to try out? Anything from the new sections you want to drill?"

Kenzie thought about it for a moment, ears flicking back and forth as she ran through her own internal inventory. Then she shook her head, the motion sending a small ripple through her orange hair.

"Not really? I haven't had enough time to really lock anything new in. I've watched a few sections, but it's all still kinda... surface-level? Background noise, basically. So whatever you think is good to start with, I'm down for."

I hummed, nodding slowly, hands resting on my hips as I tried to wrap my brain around what I was actually trying to accomplish here.

The whole core idea was simple enough on paper: Use [Elemental Balance] to emulate specific muscle movements with absolute, perfect precision, so Kenzie could see them directly—every micro-movement, every transition, every weight shift—and hopefully imitate them, or at least learn something from them.

But imitation was the harder ask.

For that to really work, I'd want access to her shard—to be able to compare what *I* was doing against what *she* was supposed to be doing, find the gaps, isolate the corrections.

And that wasn't really in the cards right now.

Well—okay. It probably *was* in the cards.

Kenzie would absolutely let me look at it if I asked.

But I really, *really* didn't want to start learning things from *her* shard when I hadn't even been keeping up with *my own* properly. That was the kind of mistake that came back to bite you three levels down the line, when something from her training collided with something from mine and my brain failed to make the distinction in time.

So the best bet was just to show her my usual movements and training in slow-motion.

Let her watch what I could *actually* do.

See if anything I demonstrated sparked an idea—something she wanted to try, something she wanted to see broken down, something she wanted to dissect.

I nodded to myself, decision made, and took a few steps back to give myself open space.

"Alright. I'm going to demo some stuff. Just watch first—don't try to copy it yet or anything. We'll figure out what's useful as we go."

Kenzie nodded back, ears swiveling forward into full focus mode.

I closed my eyes for a moment and started getting myself into the mental space to actually engage [Elemental Balance] at its full operating capacity.

It wasn't a Perk I really *used* at a hundred percent very often—there was something draining about running it at full throttle, a constant low-level concentration cost that made it impractical for casual training—but if there was ever a time to actually push it, this was it.

The whole point was the precision, after all.

I opened my eyes, settled my weight, and threw a punch.

The punch from Miss K's shard. Nothing fancy.

Just a straightforward, textbook-perfect straight punch.

I did it at full speed first. As if I were actually trying to land a clean strike on a Kenzie dashing toward me at full velocity—hip alignment locked, shoulder rotation precise, fist tracking in a clean linear path from guard to extension and back.

The whole motion completed in under half a second.

Then I did it again. Same punch, but slightly slower.

Then again. Slower still.

With each repetition, I dialed the speed down further—but the form stayed *identical*.

Every micro-movement preserved exactly as it had been at full speed. Every weight shift hitting the same percentage. Every joint reaching the same angle. Every breath cycling in the same rhythm. The whole sequence just smoothly playing out across longer and longer time scales, like a video being progressively slowed down without losing any frames.

By the fifth repetition I was moving at about a quarter speed.

By the eighth, I was at slow-motion—the kind where you would actually be able to see every individual muscle in my arm engaging and releasing in sequence, every shift in my shoulder rotation, every minute tension change across my back.

Kenzie just *stared*.

The first three repetitions, she didn't move at all. She didn't even blink, as far as I could tell.

Her brain was clearly doing the same thing my brain had done the first time I'd watched Miss K do something impossible—running on full lockup, trying and failing to reconcile what she was seeing with what she knew should be possible.

Then, somewhere around the fourth or fifth iteration, she came back to herself and inched closer. Then closer still. Until she was crouched maybe a meter away from me, head tilted, golden-amber eyes locked on my arm with an intensity that was almost uncomfortable, watching the slow-motion punch cycle through over and over.

"This is—this isn't—" she muttered, mostly to herself, the words coming out in fragments. "I mean... I know you said you could—and you even showed it earlier—but this is... There's *no way*—"

I just kept going, letting her look and mutter to herself.

"Can you—" she started, then cut herself off mid-sentence. Shook her head, ears flicking. Then she started again. "Can you show me the move you do when I charge at you? The side-step with the kick?"

"Sure," I replied—then grimaced as I started shifting movements, the rib-twinge making itself known the moment I tried to engage anything resembling a hip pivot. "Or... I can *try*, at least."

The whole sequence was right up against the edge of what my current body could actually execute, even in slow-motion.

The side-step alone was bad enough; the follow-up kick required exactly the kind of rotational hip engagement that my torso was currently filing very loud objections against.

But by carefully dialing back the power generation and keeping every motion deliberate, every transition measured—by treating it as pure technique demonstration rather than functional combat—I could *just barely* make it work.

'*Side-step. Kick. Side-step. Kick. Side-step. Kick.*' I counted off internally, breaking the movement down to its absolute fundamentals and running it through at maybe a fifth of normal speed.

Kenzie circled me as I worked, moving around the demonstration like a predator quietly assessing prey, her golden eyes never leaving my body.

Her head tilted at different angles as she changed positions, getting a look at every facet of the movement, every angle of approach, every weight transfer.

"Hmm," I heard her mutter, low and thoughtful. "Surprisingly large percentage of the weight ends up loaded on the back foot, to allow for the immediate kick follow-up... So if I focused on rapidly switching direction *toward* the back foot the moment I see the sidestep commit, there's no chance she could actually land the kick, right? She'd have to fully reset before she could chain anything new from that position."

I forcibly choked back the smile that was trying to worm its way onto my face at hearing her work through it out loud.

It seemed the half-cooked, slightly ridiculous training idea was already starting to bear fruit...